Judy and the Punch

by Jack Lait

EVERYBODY I know has a play in his trunk—except one guy I know, and he has no trunk.

The business of writing plays is probably the most intricate and complex combination of art, technique and bull that ever grown-up humans passed off as an alibi for an ostensible means of livelihood. But every callow amateur, who wouldn't dare to drive a Ford until he at least knew the difference between the footbrake and the spedometer, tears into the delicate and kaleidoscopic field of play-writing when he fails as a bookkeeper or a shipping clerk.

This brings into what nature meant to be a closed channel of endeavor the limitless competition of sentimental chambermaids, emotional brakemen, caloric haberdashers and hairy-chested stars in highbrow dramas. This would be intensely deplorable, were it not for the fact that plays written by all others than playwriters are not plays, do not play as plays, and, after a pitifully brief span of existence, do not play at all.

Grace Tinenval felt that the drama beckoned to her; in truth, it screamed to her. The poor old drama was prostrate, flat on its back and kicking its feeble and under-nourished legs on high. It wanted to be uplifted or lifted up. Grace felt that she could do either for the poor old institution. So she got herself a dime's worth of nice white paper, and she started to revolutionize the science and mechanics of play construction.

Gracie was a nice girl. She had a dimple in her right cheek, and she was a good sort, with no isms or idiosyncracies beyond those common to her sex. She wanted to write the great American comedy (a comedy is any play script with a "happy" ending) because she was human; every human being feels the call to write that masterpiece, and Gracie had the failing that proved her a full hundred per cent human.

She bit her pencil and started hunting for a "theme."

Now, a theme is a very valuable thing to have in a play. But a theme is an accident, a by-product. It is like beauty in a woman—very lovely, but accidental and incidental.

Themes cannot be made. They can result from, but they cannot lead to. The one and only essential part in a play, the foundation and basic ingredient, is an entertaining story. If a plot comes of it, and a theme comes of that plot—voila!—it has been a great week's work. But when one puts the gas-tank ahead of the radiator, and goes fine-combing for a theme before one has a tale, the outcome will be a lot of wasted time and paper, a lot of crimped feelings and a sickening flop.

Gracie, being a beginner who did not know a dramatic carbureter from a play emergency brake, naturally picked the most obvious fallacy as the most inspired truth. But she did cast one anchor to the windward—she didn't create her own theme. She picked it out of that great wealth of material provided for the "choosers" in the compiled works of that immortal, Rudyard Kipling, who etched on the pages of literature the observation that the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady were sisters under the skin.

So Gracie wrote a play entitled "Judy O'Grady." Almost everybody that writes a first play calls it "Judy O'Grady," for Kipling, like Brisbane and other interpreters into short sentences of the conclusions which the great masses think they thought after it has been put into crisp language for them, has written big things into a few small words; and he never wrote anything more sure-fire, more calculated to make the unthinking thinkers exclaim "How true! How TRUE!" than he did when he stated that Judy O'Grady was a sister to the colonel's lady under the skin.

There are so many Judys and so few colonel's ladies, that the Judys are in a vast preponderance; and they love to know and have it recorded by an acknowledged commentator that they are as good as the colonels' ladies, under the skin, if not all over.

And a few colonels' ladies admit it, for purposes of play-writing. And Gracie was one of these. She wouldn't have confessed it or even have tolerated it socially, but in the name of Art she was quite enthusiastic over the idea of placing the O. K. on what Kipling had dashed off for purposes of coining a clever rhyme.

Gracie doped it out that Judy O'Grady ought to be dramatized. Ibsen, Shakespeare, a lot of vaudeville gaggers and space-killers had beaten her to it, but Gracie felt that they had not done justice to the theme. She would write the inside story and make it clear and absolute. A colonel's lady, herself, would tell the wide, waiting world that Judy O'Grady was her sister—under the skin.

Gracie prided herself considerably about her skin, so she was reserving no small share, and that squared her with her conscience.

So she proceeded to labor over her piece. The average play takes about 30,000 words, if nothing else, and that is no mean job as pure labor. There are a great many other things entering into it. But, give Gracie credit for industry, anyway. She wrote the words.

She then read it to her family.

The family was at once alarmed and captivated. Who would have thought that this little orchid, this carefully nurtured hot-house debutante, had ever let such thoughts take root, grow, survive and develop? Why, her whole rearing had been aimed against any support or even cognizance of the O'Grady's—and here she had gone and written a lot of language in which she admitted—yes, proved—that an O'Grady was almost as good as a Tinenval!

With many misgivings, the family had to admit that "Judy O'Grady" was a wonderful thought, wonderfully carried out.

Her father arranged, through his bankers, who lent money to motion picture men, who paid money to producers, to have the producers "consider" Gracie's opus.

The particular producer selected was Jim Warren. Warren had come up from the melodrama days and nights. He had a crude idea of what would "go" and what would "die," and he managed theatres and stars and plays, and he managed to have his share of hits.

Warren had few illusions and no superstitions. He did not believe in Santa Claus, Aladdin's lamp or new women playwrights. But he did sell movie rights to the film factors, and when they, on a suggestion from the bank, requested him to give Miss Tinenval's book his friendliest once-over, he sighed and bent and said he would be delighted. Would she please send it to him?

She would not.

Gracie had read of the sub-supernumaries who read and pass on untried scripts in the offices of the theatrical mighty. She was no sap—she knew that if she sent in her folios, carefully transcribed by a professional amanuensis, a secretary's secretary would give it a passing glance and would then pin a printed slip on it—with regrets. Miss Tinenval wanted no regrets; she wanted a production.

And so she prevailed on Warren, through the bank which worked through the movie fellows, to let her read the play to the producer.

If there is one thing that a play merchant dislikes above all other things, it is to have a play read to him. For one thing, that means that he must hear all of it, whereas he can usually tell after half a dozen sentences of the introduction whether it has a chance or not; further, it injects the human element, whereas he wants to give it cold, dispassionate appraisal; and further still, it means that he must sit in the presence of an author who thinks that he or she has a new idea, a new treatment, a disclosure—while he knows in advance that no such miracles will happen.

However, Warren fell, and on the certain appointed afternoon Miss Tinenval arrived at his office, with her precious manuscript in a flat container with a handle. Warren greeted her with more than conventional courtesy, because he felt that heavy, heavy hung over her head, and he hated to be less than magnanimous to the sorry sheep which was advancing on the butcher.

Present were his manager, his secretary, and his wife.

Warren always consulted and trusted his wife in such matters. He knew that women are the bell-cows (no irony intended) of the box-office, and he regarded his wife as an average woman, proving, to begin with, that he was a man of discernment, for any man who agrees that his own wife is "average" has stepped away from most of his buddies in the ranks; married men, as a rule, are divided between those who think their wives are better or worse than most women, and sometimes they are right.

Mrs. Warren was a hard critic and a close buyer. She enjoyed all the plays that her husband presented because he had presented them, but, before they became his, she was aggressively against anything. A woman of less than the popular conception of sentiment and more than the statistical pro rata of horse sense, she knew that it was twenty to one against any play "getting over," and she wanted to have her "I told you so" nineteen times out of every twenty; therefore, she put thumbs down on everything new that came into the Warren office.

She was a pretty thing, was Mrs. Warren. She had been, like most managers' wives, a chorus girl. The fact that she had married the man who employed her proved that she was better grounded than most of the Judys. The fact that she remained married to the man who had employed her proved that she had two feet solidly on the earth's surface, for theatrical marriages are usually as substantial as a charlotte russe—cream and hokum on top, nothing inside when the crust is once broken.

Miss Tinenval bowed courteously and indulgently to Mr. Warren when she entered the office. She was properly introduced, she bowed in her well-bred way, and she seated herself in the nearest chair and said, "Shall I proceed?" Warren cleared his throat, which she properly took to mean that she should. And she did.

As a rule, Warren, when he allowed plays to be read to him at all, had a definite test. If he was still awake when the play was finished, it was a good play. On this occasion he had prepared himself to listen all the way, so he sat down resignedly, defensively.

Gracie began by a brief impromptu talk on what her play would show—teach—do. If she had a play that would deliver all that, she might have spared herself the effort, for nothing can talk for a play like a play.

She expounded the good it would do, the lesson it would teach, the finer understanding it would bring, the bigger realization it would prompt, the greater humanization it would crystalize. To Warren this was a gob of apple sauce. But he listened because the movie men had—well, he listened. And so did Mrs. Warren.

Gracie read lines and "business." Her instructions to the actors, all of whom must be stars, naturally, were copious and voluminous. One of the best things that people who know nothing about the theatre do is give instructions to actors. It takes a plumber to instruct a man as to the exact technical details of repairing a bathtub—but, thank heaven, anybody can instruct actors. Acting is only the most difficult and hair-spring art ever attempted by humankind. It requires, first of all, that spark which even most successful players miss, called talent; and most of those who have that, have nothing else. However, Gracie knew just whom she wanted in the cast and just what she wanted those she wanted to do.

Her plot was not very intricate. Judy O'Grady was the daughter of commonplace parents, who lived in the impossible section of any large city. She worked, she wore, she ate, she sighed, she loved! Yes—she loved. Even an amateur usually knows enough to know that love is the big central note of drama.

Judy, according to the lines and the parenthetical directions read by Gracie, was a noble girl. She had ideals. Rarely does a woman, except in a bad play, drag ideals with her into the stupid humdrum of a pickle-works. But Judy had poetic inclinations and she nursed them, to the extent of loving the handsome boy who drove the delivery wagon and despising the son of the pickle king, who cast lascivious eyes upon her young charms.

The pickle monarch's son was introduced to Gladys Vandervere, scion of a noble Washington Square family, whose ancestors' pictures were so musty and dusty that all the new and frankly advertised cleansing powders couldn't make them anything less than ancestors. He was compelled to marry her, but she didn't interest him. He had designs on Judy.

Judy had to hold her job. She could have slapped his face in the first act, for what would have become of the other three? (First plays always have at least four acts, and their authors mean because they can't cut the action up into six.) So she tolerated the advances of the heir, who frequented cabarets, smoked cigarets, had a little mustache, hated the male poor, and was in every way a serviceable rich man's spoiled only son.

She had two little brothers and a baby sister, and her mother was a widow—so she stood for a lot.

John Connor, the delivery wagon driver, was sent to Miss Vandervere's home one afternoon, in the second act, to deliver some flowers. Miss Vandervere took one look at his manly physique, into his clear blue Irish eyes, and Miss Vandervere let the dust of her ancestors settle thickly, she was overpowered with a sensation that was new and strange to her. In time it dawned on her—she was stuck—hooked! Oh, could this be? A Vandervere, in love with a pickle-wagon driver? That was it, exactly.

Then came the big conflict of emotions, the giant tangle of plot and counterplot.

The pickle king's son didn't love the Vandervere scioness, but he was miffed because she had stopped to look upon a teamster who had won the fancy of the label-paster whom he, the young heir, coveted.

Judy was burning up because she realized that a Vandervere had a much better chance at copping off an ambitious young union man than she, herself, with her resources limited to only honor, ideals, poverty, beauty and the leading role, could muster; yet she enjoyed the discomfiture of the insinuating, insidious millionaire-to-be.

Miss Vandervere flouted this common working woman who cast pop eyes at the young Apollo of her new, strange choice, and came to the factory in the third act to offer her a twenty-dollar bill to behave herself and gracefully retire from the situation.

Wholesome John Connor was almost swept off his feet by the love of a Vandervere, and he realized what it meant to him; but he loved Judy O'Grady. His manly, honest arms ached to hold her in their embrace.

Judy made a play for the pickle khedive's crown prince, in order to awaken the jealousy of John Connor. Miss Vandervere made absurd love to her own fiancee, to get the same result from John. The young millionaire made violent love to Miss Vandervere in order to attract Judy's interest, and Judy flirted shamelessly with him, though her heart wasn't in it, to get John's goat.

It wasn't a bad premise for a play, thus far. Warren listened and even his little wife saw a possibility.

Gracie read it triumphantly. She talked and she argued, she quoted and she philosophized. Water and wine wouldn't mix. John had his pride to look after, as well as his love for Judy. Judy knew that even if she successfully vamped the rich hounder into legal matrimony, he was a rotten egg. Miss Vandervere knew that John was in his heart a gentleman, but the heart is so difficult to see, let alone display to others, and her social status would be one-half of one per cent if she managed to get across this silly whim.

They all understood. They all realized that, while this is a democracy, each of us is born into a stratum and must not cross the deadline.

And so the pickle sultan's son married Miss Vandervere while he had a hangover, and Judy faded out in John's strong arms at the final tag.

Warren looked at her; she looked at Warren; Mrs. Warren looked at both.

"I think if we had Jane Cowl for Judy, and Conway Tearle for John, and"——

"That's the start of a fair cast, Miss Tinenval," said Warren.

"I think we should have the very best," said Gracie.

"If you'll pardon me," interposed Mrs. Warren, "I think you ought to rewrite the play."

"What portion of it?"

"All of it."

"I cannot agree with you. I have given it a great deal of thought and effort and preparatory study. Kipling is a great genius, if I am not, and my play proves at least the truth of one of his biggest thoughts."

"Proves it where—how?"

"Judy O'Grady, typifying her sort, loves John; so does Miss Vandervere, who typifies hers. Doesn't that prove that they are sisters under the skin?"

"Does it?" asked Mrs. Warren. "Say, he's so noble and grand and churchgoing and square that I don't think any woman could stand him for half an hour. If both those Janes fancied for him, it proves that they ought to get their skin examined."

"Their skins, Mrs. Warren, are not alike. It is under their skins that, as Kipling pointed out"——

"I see," said Warren. "You skin these women, and if I can skin the public we'll skin by, eh? I'm sorry, Miss Tinenval, but I frankly think your play is a lemon. It lacks the story, the surprise, the climax, the suspense—most of all, the punch."

"Oh," chirped Miss Tinenval, "you speak very coarsely. The suspense is there during four acts, until the last five minutes. The story is continuous. The surprise is supplied by the two miscast affairs, the attraction of social opposites. The climax is at the very end.

"And as for the punch—I didn't want to descend to actual violence, but if you think it important, I can have John strike the young villain in the third act."

"Yeh," muttered Mrs. Warren—"that'd be a knockout."

"I wouldn't go as far as that," protested Miss Tinenval. "Knockouts are brutal."

"So are some plays," said Warren.

"This piece may be there under the skin. But from where I sit it's got eczema," was Mrs. Warren's profession. "Come on, Jim, this play is scratched."

Gracie Read Lines and "Business." Her Instructions to the Actors, All of Whom Must Be Stars, Naturally, Were Copious and Voluminous.